Magazine

False starts

The seven good byways of science…Publishing

Dear Sofie,

No, I don't at all mind you writing to me. I have nothing much to do these days and helping you is a pleasure and not an imposition. Most people will think it a pity that you have decided that you don't like doing research just after getting your PhD, but it is much better to make this decision now rather than incorporating it into a mid-life crisis in 20 years time. I don't fully understand the reasons you offer, especially the one about the music on the radio in the graduate student's lab, but I agree that a strong and sensitive girl needs something better than a boring postdoc in a unexciting place.

One suggestion I can make is that you try scientific publishing and, in particular, you should consider journal editing. There you will find many people who made the same decision to leave science and work in the exciting area of knowledge transmission, thus benefiting science in two ways.

You will learn that journals are solely responsible for the very high standards of judgement of intellectual ability that we enjoy today. Many decisions affecting the careers of working scientists are now left in the capable hands of a choice set of journals, thus allowing us to dispose of all those wasteful appointment and promotion committees. You will also meet, and have daily encounters, with an extraordinarily important group of scientists who constitute invisible — but not inaudible — colleges in the different disciplines. These politburos perform the difficult and onerous task of guiding both the science and the scientists in the proper directions and will help you to decide what is interesting, important and credible.

The development of this area of para-scientific activity can be attributed partly to growth in the numbers of journals, but largely to the discovery that editors do not have to read the papers submitted to them. It was different 40 years ago when I dabbled in journal editing. Then it was felt that editors had to be working scientists and understand the problems posed, the methods used and the answers found. In fact, there was a rule that whereas one editor could accept a paper, it required the concurrence of two editors for its rejection.

I developed several skills in this work. One was how to write letters breaking the bad news gently to authors. Phrases such as "the paper is far too long for its definitive content" survive to this day, I believe. I was never allowed to add that this content tended to 0, nor the suggestion that the length be increased by a factor of three and the paper submitted to a rival journal.

I also became sensitive to fraudulent claims and, in one case, suggested that authors carry out an additional experiment, which I knew could not work for subtle reasons. When the amended manuscript was received in the office with the bogus experiment faithfully executed, I sent a telegram informing them that I had made a dreadful mistake and hoped they had not followed my advice. All we then needed to do was to send the paper back to them.

Another important skill I acquired was that of translating Japanese English into real English, learning, for example, to apply what I called the prepositional calculus to sentences such as "10 ml of medium was added with 5 μg/ml tryptophan". I also knew when "varid" was "valid" and not "varied" and when "morecle" was "molecule" and not "miracle". In order to teach novices these fine distinctions, I urged them to consider the following restaurant notice: "Owing to lack of ram, there is no rack of lamb."

I learnt, too, how to deal with referees but never solved the problem of the referee who clung to manuscripts for months beyond the deadline and failed to respond to letters, telegrams, telephone calls and reports to the chairman of his department. Some people entertained the thought that he was deliberately trying to delay publication of the paper, presumably because he was doing similar experiments, but I thought this most uncharitable and preferred to believe that he subscribed to the great principle of never doing today that which you can do tomorrow.

Today, things have changed and everything is simpler. All you will have to do as a journal editor is to read the title, which should tell you what the paper is about. Good titles need to be in the declarative, such as *'Nox-1* is a regulator of the *dor* and *nob* genes, and is activated by the *bang* kinase family". Next, note the author's address to check that the paper comes from somewhere good rather than from a place you have never heard of. Sometimes authors give lists of referees they want or don't want to look at their paper. If they don't want their paper seen by anyone you recognize, it can't be much good. If the paper doesn't meet these standards, reject it with one of those standard letters you are bound to have at your disposal; otherwise send it out to referees, remembering that they are there to help you and not the authors.

I hope this helps you in your career choice. Do let me know how you are getting on.

Your ever-loving Grandpa Syd